

The Problems of Amateur Writers (or, Why We All Have Jobs)

- Writing is hard, and most people don't take the time to learn to do it very well.
- It is hard to detect the difference between what you meant to say and what you actually wrote. This leads to great arguments.
- Problems: disorganized, diffuse, vague, wordy, dull, trite, clumsy. For starters.
- As a result, editors fix stuff. Sometimes we fix errors, sometimes we take stuff that is fair and make it better.
- Often the fixes are subtle, which leads people to think that we are simply changing “small dog” to “puppy” because we have nothing better to do.



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Safety Editors Conference
Norfolk, Virginia, September 2003

A Thankless Job

(or, How to Know When You Have Gotten Serious)

- “Y’know, Chief Jones writes better than I thought.”
- Editing billboards while driving to Florida.
- Commenting on what people say on the radio—things you’d change if you had it as a piece of copy: *“The chance that older people in my district will be able to take advantage of the medicare drug coverage is virtually slim to none.”*
- My pleasure at finding a typo in National Geographic: “pouring over manuscripts...” [“pore”]



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1. “Beware of walking or skating on ice. It could become thin because of circumstances that can effect the strength of the ice.”

[“Watch out for thin ice.”]

2. “Without further ado...”

[Sorry, too much “ado” already]

3. *[This line appeared at the bottom of page 2 of a 2.5-page article]*

“‘What's the point?’ you're surely asking yourself by now.”

4. “...noticed a slight roaring sound coming from over his head in the aircraft cabin as we pulled into a hover.”

[All definitions say “loud,” so this is an oxymoron; plus the word “sound” isn't necessary]

5. “... although I couldn't see his eyes through the visor, the expression on his face was a worried one.”

[“expression on his face” is redundant; “he looked worried”]



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6. "The situation then started to conspire against us."
[Can a single thing conspire? I think it takes at least two]

7. "... the tried and true triple-double slider (two meat paddies, two pieces of cheese, two fried eggs)."
[patties]

8. "... the safety shoes cost \$54.50 a pair."
[Do we need to say "a pair"? Have you ever seen shoes priced per shoe?]

9. "The man hit his head on the asphalt and suffered a concussion. He is in an intensive care unit at a naval hospital with an undetermined prognosis."
Do the final four words add any information to the sentence? Do they even qualify as "information," or do they represent a lack of information?

10. "Some of us have adopted the Army's term of 'loss of tail rotor effectiveness (LTE).'"
Why isn't it "LTRE"?



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11. "His whereabouts are unknown." -- National Public Radio, January 1991
Is "whereabouts" singular or plural? Can someone have multiple "whereabouts"?

12. In quotations, do people talk in parentheses? In semi-colons?

13. In the phrases "It doesn't bode well" and "I felt a sense of foreboding", is there a difference between "bode" and "forebode"? "Bode" means "to announce in advance, to predict; to be an omen of; to presage." "Forebode" means "to indicate beforehand; portend; foretell; predict."

14. "Working over the side and aloft are inherently dangerous tasks."
What is the difference between "dangerous" and "inherently dangerous"?

15. You can say "I've got a bone to pick with you," and "She made no bones about it." Is this the same bone?

16. "... the visibility went to zero in thick clouds and heavy precipitation."
[why not say "rain"?)



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17. [on National Public Radio] "...a 16-year-old Spokane, Washington, teenager..."

18. "the relaxation industry"
(Is this an oxymoron?)

19. *[This text was in the fine print at the bottom of an ad for something called the Cybergenics QuickTrim System, in which a woman alleges she lost 19 pounds in 2 weeks; the ad doesn't specify what the product is, although the photo makes it look like pills and a vague diet]* "Charlene Meyer used Cybergenics QuickTrim system of diet, training and sophisticated supplementation. Individual results may vary. In New York City: The supplement component will not promote faster fat loss."
[Just New York? Why?]

20. "He felt something wet splash around his eyes."
[Would something hard or solid or gaseous "splash"?)]

21. "If possible, nap briefly."
[Isn't a nap supposed to be brief? The definition is "to sleep lightly and briefly."]



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22. *A technical expert helps one of our editors with her editing*

- *Our edited version: “so your brakes won't overheat”*
Their revision: “to prevent your brakes from overheating”
- *Our edited version: “food”*
Their revision: “foodstuffs”
- *Our edited version: “used”*
Their revision: “utilized”
- *Our edited version: “flat tire on the trailer”*
Their revision: “flat trailer tire”
- *Our edited version: “about six pounds”*
Their revision: “approximately six pounds”
- *Our edited version: “flammables”*
Their revision: “inflammables”
- *Our edited version: [part of a list of things to carry in your car or trailer]*
“a tire gauge”
Their revision: “your own tire gauge”
- *Our edited version: “a flashlight”*
Their revision: “a good flashlight”



23. "His initial response to this condition was to immediately select environmental-control system (ECS) air source off."
[He immediately turned off the environmental-control system (ECS) air source]

24. "The pilot had failed to maintain adequate nourishment during the day of the mishap flight while simultaneously consuming excessive amounts of coffee."
[The pilot hadn't eaten enough food during the day of the mishap flight and had drunk too much coffee.]

25. "I snuck a quick peek at the HAC..."
[Redundant: "peeked..."]

26. "Prior training caused me to calm down."
[as opposed to "future training"? "My training helped me calm down."]

27. ". . . time spent beforehand on preparation."
[delete "beforehand"; when else would you prepare?]

28. "I witnessed first-hand..."



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29. "... I felt my previous aviation experience would hold up well to the challenges ahead."

[*"previous...experience" is redundant*]

30. "He saw a shipmate place a paper cup, which contained a purple colored liquid, on deck."

[*delete "colored"*]

31. I wonder about the meaning of such words as *many, few, often, recent, sometimes* and *several*. For instance: "*Unfortunately, when sailors dive for recreation, they ignore safe-diving practices... The result is often fatal.*"

"Often"? I doubt it. Hundreds of sailors dive for fun, and only one or two drown every year. I asked my staff to assume that Navy personnel make 1,000 recreational dives in a year. How many divers would have to drown before an author should write that divers "often" die? The answers: 700, 8, 10, 100, 30, and 500. The editor who gave the lowest answer didn't have to interpret "often" because she knew the approximate number of Navy diving fatalities. The people who gave the two highest numbers had no idea how many divers drowned. They said that "often" means "more than half the time."



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Our Enemies

- **argot** --special vocabulary and idiom used by a particular group as a means of private communication.
- **bureaucratese** -- bloated language that always opts for the extra syllable and the extra word.
- **cant** -- the expression or repetition of conventional, trite, or unconsidered ideas, opinions, or sentiments.
- **double-talk** -- inflated, involved, and often deliberately ambiguous language. Cartoonist Jeff MacNelly calls it “bloviation.”
- **euphemism** -- the substitution of an agreeable or inoffensive word or expression for one that is harsh, indelicate, or otherwise unpleasant.
- **gibberish** -- confused, unintelligible, or meaningless or language; pretentious or needlessly obscure speech or language.
- **gobbledygook** - wordy and generally unintelligible jargon; inflated, involved, and obscure verbiage, usually associated with bureaucratic pronouncements.
- **jargon** -- technical terminology fashionable in a particular group or clique; vague language full of circumlocutions and long high-sounding words.



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for an EDITOR



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Admissions Director

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may concern:

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rest of eternity.

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